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Closed Politics in Mississippi

Statewide meetings of the Mississippi Democratic Party held in June and July were faced with situations not faced before in the Magnolia State. For the first time there was an organized effort on the part of Negroes to attend precinct, county and district meetings. At the same time, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was being organized and planning its own precinct, county and district meetings. Pledging loyalty to the national Democratic Party, the Freedom Democratic Party will ask to be seated at the national convention. However, this has not made the regular state party act more carefully. Anti-national party feeling is as strong as ever.

Negroes attempted to attend at least 27 regular party precinct meetings in Batesville, Canton, Clarksdale, Columbus, Greenville, Greenwood, Hattiesburg, Jackson, Meridian, Ruleville, Tchula, Thornton, and Vicksburg. There were also plans to attend the Philadelphia precinct meeting but, out of fear, these were abandoned the last minute.

According to law, precinct meetings were to be held at 10 a.m. at the regular polling place on June 16. At Tchula, Negroes were not permitted to enter. At eight other precincts--in Batesville, Canton, Greenwood, Meridian, Ruleville and Thornton--Negroes could not find any precinct meetings. The polling places were either locked or empty. In several places, Negroes asked about the meetings only to be told that there weren't any. In these cases, the Negroes then held their own precinct meetings.

In Canton Negroes found the Old Veterans home, regular polling place, locked. They waited till after ten, then went to the Old Courthouse. No one was there either and they returned to the veterans home where they held their own meeting. While they had been on their trip to the courthouse, a reporter saw five whites, including state senator Earl Evans, Jr., arrive at the veterans home in a black Cadillac sedan. The five went inside. About five minutes later they came out and drove off.

At the other 18 meetings, Negroes were admitted but their participation varied. Two of the meetings were stalled till the chairman was able to get more whites to attend. At one of these seven of eight Negroes were not permitted in because they had not paid their poll tax for the last two years. At only eight of these 18 meetings were Negroes allowed to participate freely.

At the precinct meetings, slates of unpledged delegates to the 82 county conventions were overwhelmingly elected. Three precincts in Hinds County (Jackson) adopted resolutions opposing national party policies. State Democratic chairman Bidwell Adam said he was in agreement with these and other similar resolutions that called on the party "to retain and adhere to the traditional principles of the Mississippi Democratic Party."

The Hinds County resolutions asked that national convention delegates "be instructed to support only such candidates and platform statements as are consistent with the principles of the Mississippi Democratic Party." They said state Democrats should stand for the principles of the party "as embodied by such gallant statesmen as Govs. Ross Barnett and Fielding Wright, Rep. John Bell Williams (who on partisan roll calls in the 87th Congress voted with the national party only 18 percent of the time) and, more recently, fighting Gov. George Wallace of Alabama." These principles, the resolutions said, are of far greater importance to Mississippi Democrats than the temporary success or failure of any national political party.

On June 23, Negroes attempted to attend at least seven of the county conventions. In Madison County, Negroes went to the announced meeting place at the announced time. There they were told that there would not be any county convention. The meeting they were witnessing which was choosing delegates was a meeting of the county executive committee. The chairman told them to leave which they did.

Nor were Negroes allowed to participate at the Lauderdale and Leflore County conventions. At the Leflore convention, the 16 delegates chosen to the state convention included Robert Patterson, executive secretary of the National Association of White Citizens' Councils, and Hardy Lott who is executive secretary of the county Democratic Party, Greenwood city attorney and one of Byron Beckwith's defense attorneys and a local leader in the Citizens' Council.

In Washington County Negroes were allowed to attend the convention which was not even announced in the local paper as required by law. However, none of the delegates from the 3rd precinct in Greenville, which had approved the loyalty resolution, attended and thus this

resolution could not be presented.

Negroes were also allowed to participate in Sunflower and Warren County conventions. At the Warren convention a resolution was passed which condemned the civil rights bill and the supreme court for the school desegregation and subsequent decisions. The convention also voted not to support national Democratic candidates but to support instead a slate of unpledged electors. The two Negro delegates cast the only dissenting votes on each. Alderman O. J. Bori accused the Johnson administration of "leading this nation to the inroads of socialism and toward the path of communism."

At the Hinds County convention everyone was seated by precinct except for a Negro delegate and alternate who were seated in the back. Two white women, the other delegate and alternate from their precinct, sat up front. The keynote speaker, state treasurer Bill Winters, urged that Mississippi's seven electoral votes not be cast for the nominee of the National Democratic Party. And longstanding chairman Will Wells and secretary C. Arthur Sullivan were unseated in favor of strong advocates of unpledged electors: John R. Wright, an outspoken Jackson segregationist and a colonel on Gov. Johnson's staff, and Dr. M. Ney Williams, a member of the board of directors of the Jackson Citizens' Council.

At the other county conventions, resolutions urging an unpledged elector slate and criticizing the national party were passed. "Free electors" were urged to bargain with the national party for platform planks calling for segregation, states' rights and constitutional government. In Wayne County the convention went so far as to adopt a resolution instructing district and state convention delegates to vote for and support only persons who were pledged to bring about the complete defeat of Lyndon Johnson.

Only in Jackson County did a convention adopt a resolution urging the state to stay in the national party and seek to resolve differences.

At the five district meetings in June and July, electors were nominated who are strong supporters of the unpledged elector movement. Circuit Judge Walter M. O'Barr, whose grand jury indicted the federal marshalls at Oxford, was nominated from the first district; state senator George Yarbrough, an active member of the Citizens' Council and of the Wallace presidency campaign, from the second district; Circuit Judge Russel Moore, a leader of the unpledged elector movement, from the third district; and John McLauren, former state senator who was active in the blocking of Meredith at Ole Miss, from the fourth district.

There is no sign of change in the anti-national party feelings and actions of the state party, even when it is being challenged by a new party which supports the national party. Martin Luther King spent the third week in July touring Mississippi for the Freedom Democratic Party, to gain increased support and raise funds. At the same time a 68-member Freedom Democratic Party national convention delegation was being chosen.

Still, according to state Democratic Chairman Bidwell Adam, Mississippi Democrats are not worried about the challenge, although the state Democratic organizations in New York, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oregon and Wisconsin are all supporting to some degree the Freedom Democratic Party in its bid for convention seating.

The national convention will be forced to choose between a delegation openly proud of its disloyalty but which controls the state administration and is supported by most Mississippians permitted to vote, and a loyal delegation with almost no power but with the

support of liberal Democrats in the north and west.

This puts President Johnson in a real dilemma. He may feel he will have to make a conservative shift because of the GOP nomination of Barry Goldwater, but then there are also the many northern Democratic groups who do not favor seating the regular Mississippi delegation. And whether Johnson, who's a counterfeit Confederate according to conservative southern leaders, could win states' rights Democrats away from Goldwater is questionable.

Since Wallace has withdrawn, there are many signs that Mississippi Democrats will throw their support to Goldwater. They could threaten to do so at the convention unless they are seated. But this would imply that if seated they would pledge to support the national party. In 1960 they did so, but then went back on their word and the state cast its electoral votes for Harry Byrd. Even if seated, chances are that Mississippi Democrats would support Goldwater anyway.

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Rep. Fred Jones, a member of the Mississippi Democratic Party executive committee for the past eight years and an elector in the 1956 election, wrote in mid-July to a Jackson political columnist that Mississippi Democrats could no longer hope to "work out our differences with the national party within the framework of the party." "Goldwater is a man southern Democrats can vote for," he pointed out. "I urge that Mississippi Democrats begin at the top and work down to the grassroots with Democratic organizations for the election of Barry Goldwater."

The choice thus becomes one of Goldwater Democrats or national party Democrats.

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